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ABSTRACT

Although there are several reasons to anticipate that older people would be less likely than younger ones to support feminist issues, data from this research do not support this contention. From data gathered in a random sample of 210 residents of a mid-size city in Alabama, it was found that older persons are generally as likely or more likely than younger persons to endorse feminist positions. A majority of the older persons supported 11 of the 12 positions presented and were more likely than younger persons to support some positions. These findings suggest that advocates of women's issues who are interested in broadening their bases of popular support might do well to look to older women and men as potential participants in their advocacy efforts. (Author)

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Age and Support of Feminist Issues: A Research Note

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Age and Support of Feminist Issues:

A Research Note

ABSTRACT

Although there are two different bases to anticipate that older people would be less likely to support feminist issues than those who are younger, these data do not support this contention. Using data gathered from a random sample of 210 residents of a mid-size city in Alabama, we find that older persons are generally as likely or more likely than younger persons to endorse feminist positions. A majority of the older persons support eleven of the twelve positions presented and are more likely than younger persons to support some positions. Implications of these findings for the feminist movement are discussed.

In recent years various advocacy groups have been working to ease discrimination on the basis of sex and to improve the status of women in American society. The rhetoric of such groups suggests that their goals would benefit all women. However, a large proportion of the specific policy goals proposed (for example, improved access to higher education, equal treatment in labor force participation, improved contraception, and freely available child care) appear to be directed primarily toward women in the childbearing and rearing years.

As Lewis and Butler (1972) suggest, policy goals of women's advocacy groups have virtually ignored the needs of the 11 million women over age 65. An examination of the National Organization for Women national convention platform of 1970, for example, reveals few statements related to discrimination in Social Security and other retirement benefits, access of older women to health care, or eliminating the double discrimination of age and sex in employment. In view of the apparently relatively low priority given by women's advocacy groups to issues impacting the older woman, one might predict that older women will be less inclined than younger women to endorse those issues traditionally supported by feminist groups.

One might also predict relatively low endorsement of feminist issues by both older women and older men on the basis of cohort socialization. Such a prediction would flow from the assumption that an older cohort, reared in a time when it was more widely believed that women's activities should be confined to home and family, would carry values learned early in life into their later years.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether, as the preceding analysis suggests, older persons are less likely than those who are younger to support feminist issues. A subsidiary concern is to ascertain what, if any, impact sex of the respondent might have on the relationship between age and endorsement of feminist positions.

METHODS

Data for this study were gathered from a stratified random sample of 210 residents of a mid-size city in Alabama through in-home interviews. The typical respondent was 40.7 years old and had completed 13.6 years of school. Because of the stratification plan, the sample was approximately evenly divided between males (107) and females (103).

Respondents were asked to respond to a series of twelve statements about women's issues using five possible response categories (strongly agree to strongly disagree). Items were drawn from each of the nine subscales of the Attitudes Toward Feminist Issues Scale (Elmore, Brodsky, and Naffziger, 1975) based on resolutions of the 1970 national convention platform of the National Organization for Women. Responses to the twelve items selected were dichotomized into endorse (strongly agree and agree) and failure to endorse (neutral through strongly disagree) categories.

Data were analyzed using an odds, log-linear model (Davis, 1974; Goodman, 1970, 1972, 1973a, 1973b). In this approach, the odds of endorsing a position, defined as the number of those supporting divided by the number of those not supporting, are viewed as a function of general, age, sex, and age by sex effects. The advantages of this approach are that there is a clearly defined measure for each of the effects and that there is, for large samples, a test of significance of the effects.

RESULTS

The first striking feature of these data is the relatively high levels of endorsement of the items both by the younger and by the older respondents (see Table 1). For eleven of the twelve items, the odds ratio is greater than one,

indicating that a larger number support than fail to support these issues. The odds range from a low of 11 to 10 to a high of almost 6½ to 1. In fact, the magnitude of this positive effect is so large that it is statistically significant in eight of the twelve cases.

The only item which a majority of the sample fail to endorse is the one which deals with the need for women's rights legislation. Given that the Equal Rights Amendment was being debated by the Alabama legislature at the time of the data collection, it could well be that the respondents perceived endorsement of this item would imply support for the Equal Rights Amendment. Such a perception may have resulted in lower levels of endorsement than would have been the case were the ERA not receiving extensive coverage in the media.

[Table 1 about here]

In examining the effects of age on the likelihood of endorsing feminist positions, we find very little support for our initial hypothesis, that older persons are less supportive than younger persons of these positions. A majority of those 50 or older endorsed eleven of the twelve statements (see Table 1). In six cases, the odds that younger persons will endorse the issue were greater than the odds that older persons will, but, in only one of these cases, was the ratio statistically significant. On the other hand, in five cases, the odds that older persons will endorse the issue were greater than the odds that younger persons will and, again, one of these relationships is statistically significant.

In reviewing those items where there are age differences, it is interesting to note that younger respondents appear to be more likely than older respondents to endorse items which, at least on the surface, would seem to be most beneficial to younger cohorts. As interesting, however, is the finding that those who are

older appear to be more likely than those who are younger to endorse positions which would seem to be beneficial to those of all ages.

As might be anticipated, females appear to be more likely to support feminist issues than are males. In 10 of the twelve cases the odds ratios are less than one, indicating that fewer males than females endorse the statements. In 3 of these cases, the ratio is statistically significant. The failure to find a sex by age interaction effect for any of the items, however, suggests that older women are just as likely as younger women to support these issues. Thus the effects in this phase of the analysis are strictly sex effects, applying equally to older and to younger women.

IMPLICATIONS

These findings suggest that advocates of women's issues who are interested in broadening their bases of popular support might do well to look to older women and men as potential participants in their advocacy efforts. The finding that over half of the older cohort endorsed eleven of the twelve items was surprising and contrary to our expectations that cohort socialization might result in opposition to feminist issues.

Perhaps even more surprising is the moderately high level of endorsement which older persons give to issues which appear to have little direct bearing on the lives of older women (contraception, career counseling, ending sex discrimination in education). The fact that the women's movement has concentrated its effort on the needs of the younger woman has, apparently, not alienated the old from it.

It is interesting to note, however, that the issues which are potentially as applicable to older women as to younger women receive higher levels of endorsement among the old than among the young. Taken together, these findings

suggest that members of the older cohort are potentially strong supporters of many current feminist issues. Their endorsement for the women's movement in general might well be even greater if women's advocates placed greater emphasis on issues which directly affect older women and on issues of potential benefit to all women.

Finally, it should be noted that these data were collected in Alabama, a state typically described as conservative in matters of social change, and one whose legislature has consistently and overwhelmingly defeated ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. Were similar studies to be conducted in other geographic regions or using national probability samples, even higher levels of endorsement of feminist issues by older persons might well be found.

Table 1. Endorsement of feminist issues by age and sex.

Item:	*Percent Endorsing*		*Odds Ratio*			
	Under 50	50 or older	General	Age(A)	Sex(S)	SXA
1. Free contraceptives should be available to anyone through public hospitals or clinics.	65.3%	66.5%	1.40[a]	0.96	1.00	1.06
2. Public funds should be used to develop new methods of contraception which are safer and more convenient.	75.5%	68.4%	2.56[a]	1.19	0.74[b]	0.95
3. Child care facilities should be freely available to all economic and social groups.	59.5%	52.6%	1.32[b]	1.12	0.60[a]	1.08
4. Passage of legislation to further the case of women's rights is necessary.	49.7%	44.1%	0.89	1.07	0.82	0.91
5. Career counseling should be available to all women.	87.4%	79.3%	4.41[a]	1.50[b]	0.86	0.88
6. All women should recognize their sisterhood with other women.	47.6%	56.9%	1.11	0.83	0.81	1.08
7. Marriage should be an equal partnership with shared economic responsibility.	71.1%	72.9%	2.62[a]	0.95	0.77	1.11
8. Marriage should be an equal partnership with shared household responsibility.	77.6%	81.3%	4.63[a]	0.93	0.68[b]	1.01
9. Care of children should be shared equally by both spouses.	88.2%	83.0%	6.59[a]	1.24	0.70	0.97
10. Feminist views should receive equal time on TV and radio.	58.3%	72.4%	1.90[a]	0.73[b]	1.18	0.91
11. The rights of women to be ordained should be recognized in all religious bodies.	53.6%	53.4%	1.13	1.00	0.93	0.89
12. Educational institutions should erase sex discrimination.	84.7%	73.3%	4.04[a]	1.37	0.81	1.11
N	150	60				

[a] p less than .05, two-tailed test

[b] p less than .10, two-tailed test

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